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SWIFT'S DISCOURSE OF POLITICS AND POLITICS  
OF DISCOURSE: DISENFRANCHISEMENT THROUGH  
DEFINITION

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In *Some Thoughts on the Present State of Affairs May 1714*, written in his retirement at Letcombe Bassett after the break between Harley and Bolingbroke, Jonathan Swift reflects upon his service as propaganda master in the turbulent Harley ministry and offers a most successful way to manage an argument: "In all Contests the safest Way is to put those we dispute with, as much in the Wrong as we can."<sup>1</sup> One of the best ways to put them in the wrong is to subvert their words and thus destroy the foe by destroying his words. The strategy of much of Swift's prose is to assert political control over his opponents by asserting control over their language. He seeks to disenfranchise his foes by denying them control over their own words. By continually calling attention to what he deems their misuse of words and then "correcting" those words, Swift establishes his political power. Swift employs a number of rhetorical strategies to accomplish this appropriation: he uses signal phrases like "under the Name" to suggest a distance between word and thing; he treats his opponents' figurative language as if it were literal and vice versa; and, most frequently, he defines or redefines a key word in his own or his foes' argument. Indeed, many of his works revolve around a definition or redefinition of a specific word like "Protestant," "Moderate," or "Subjection," and demonstrate the abuses of religion and politics wrought by his opponent's misuse of that word. The opening sentence of *On the Testimony of Conscience* offers a typical example: "There is no Word more frequently in the Mouths of Men, than that of *Conscience*, and the Meaning of it is in some Measure generally understood: However...it is likewise a Word extremely abused by many People, who apply other Meanings to it, which God Almighty never intended" (9: 150). He then provides his own definition in order to reassert the proper word-thing relationship and consequently to reassert the proper religious and political behavior. What is at stake in such definitions and redefinitions is power, control of language as control of political power and control of political power as control of language. In this use of definition for polemical purposes, we see one of the great paradoxes of Swift's work: he is desperately afraid of the consequences of the abuse of the word-thing relationship, but at the same time he faces the need to get political work done and recognizes that to do so he must use what he

sees as his foes' own methods. He demonstrates brilliance in manipulating language, often in the very process of censuring others for exactly the same abuse.

Two purposes underlie Swift's use of definition: lexical purity and polemical effectiveness. As for the first, the same impulse that leads Swift to write *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* causes him to define as a way of "fixing" words by specifying the word-thing relationship at least in this place at this time. Although the preponderance of Swift's definitions are polemical, a few are straightforward attempts to assert lexical accuracy. Of the few non-polemical examples, most define legal, technical, or other "hard" words. Another class of relatively non-polemical definitions contains Swift's pronouncements on the "proper" meaning of common words, the most well-known of which is "Proper Words in Proper Places, makes the true Definition of Stile" (9: 65). These few pronouncements invariably refer to some form of social behavior or taste rather than to partisan politics, although the two are never entirely separate in Swift's world. In these instances Swift deploys his definitions as a base from which to lecture upon "proper" behavior; such lectures are indeed a kind of argument but these arguments certainly depend less upon an aggressive manipulation of language than his political arguments. For example, Swift opens *On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding* with the definition, "Good-Manners is the Art of making those People easy with whom we converse" (4: 213), and a little later adds a definition on the obverse of good manners: "Pedantry is properly the overrating any Kind of Knowledge we pretend to" (4: 215). After these definitions Swift explains what kinds of behavior fall under each term, and in doing so he is indeed arguing. At the same time, however, the control of these specific words—"good-manners" and "pedantry"—is not the central purpose of the definitions or the essay, nor is he attacking or "Correcting" an opponent's use of these words.

Swift's careful attention to definition in an attempt to "fix" the word-thing relationship in the interest of lexical correctness is, of course, not unique: indeed, a careful definition of words and terms is a central tenet of virtually every post-Baconian philosopher, including Hobbes and Locke. One of the main aims of these philosophers is to avoid the linguistic hairsplitting and "tedious disputes over words" of the Schoolmen, and definition is usually seen as the first and best defense. Bacon claims, "It is almost necessary, in all controversies and disputations, to imitate the wisdom of the mathematicians, in setting down in the very beginning the definition of our words and terms, that others may know how we accept and understand them, and whether they

concur with us or no. For it cometh to pass, for want of this, that we are sure to end there where we ought to have begun, which is, in questions and differences about words."<sup>2</sup> Hobbes also calls for strict, formal definitions as the foundation of philosophy: "The light of human minds is perspicuous words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity."<sup>3</sup> One of the achievements Sprat boasts of in his *History of the Royal Society* is how the members have reformed the abuses of the Schoolmen by replacing the Schoolmen's words with "things" secured by experimentation and careful definition. Swift agrees wholeheartedly with this refutation, as evidenced, for instance, by his treatment of Scotus and other Schoolmen as dunces and frauds in the episodes on Glubbudbrib, the Island of Sorcerers, in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, and he agrees with the goal of a one word-one thing relationship. His difference, however, is that while he sees definition as one way to achieve this goal, he does not agree that it is the only way nor that there is only one way of defining as Hobbes and Locke have it. Swift accomplishes his definitions not primarily through the rigorous, formal, mathematical definitions of the logicians and philosophers, but rather through a variety of informal definitions and rhetorical devices. Also unlike Hobbes, Locke, and most of his predecessors, Swift is much more likely to apply definition to the words of others than to his own.

Throughout his *Essay* Locke does indeed purge the words he intends to use of their earlier accretions; as he announces the purpose of his work in "The Epistle to the Reader," "It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Accumulated misdefinitions are a part of the rubbish he is clearing. For example, in his definition of "man" Locke claims, "I think that to one who desired to know what *Idea* the word *Man* stood for; if it should be said, that *Man* was a solid extended Substance, having Life, Sense, spontaneous Motion, and the Faculty of Reasoning, I doubt not but the meaning of the term *Man*, would be as well understood, and the *Idea* it stands for be at least as clearly made known, as when it is defined to be a *rational Animal*....I have in explaining the term *Man*, followed here the ordinary Definition of the Schools."<sup>5</sup> But while Locke then builds upon the ground he has cleared, Swift is far more interested in appropriating the ground he is clearing or at least in scorching the ground to deny it to the opposition. Sometimes he simply wishes to reconnect the original "correct" thing with the correct word, but far more often his redefinitions serve as the preface and opening sally in

some argument; he will not only "clear the ground," as Locke would have it, but will also advance a considerable way over it under the cover of definition or redefinition. In the fourth *Drapier's Letter* Swift attacks the claim that Ireland is "a *depending Kingdom*" by objecting to this phrase as "a *modern Term of Art*," repudiating what his opposition means by it—"that the People of Ireland is in some State of Slavery or Dependence, different from those of England," and redefines the "dependence" as the loyalty and legal obligations both nations owe the King (10: 62). Swift advances more than lexical propriety here; rather he reiterates one of the major tenets in his argument against Wood's halfpence: the English Parliament has no legal right to legislate for Ireland, in this case as to what is or is not legal tender. If Swift's reader accepts the premise that appears as a redefinition, he will have to accept Swift's conclusion about the halfpence.

At times Swift offers his definition in the form of a Trojan horse—something which appears to be neutral but which in fact contains his strongest forces or arguments. The Examiner, in particular, often protests his neutrality in political issues and purports to "examine" current events with an unbiased perspective, only to employ definitions of crucial words in order to argue pointedly for the Harley ministry's position under cover of this neutrality. Similarly, in the first *Drapier's Letter* Swift employs a Trojan horse tactic in his definition of "Lawful Money," "Half-Penny," and "Farthing" in order to refute Wood's halfpence. Under the appearance of explaining the terminology of English law concerning coinage, the Drapier says, "By the Laws of *England*, the several Metals are divided into *Lawful* or *true Metal* and *unlawful* or *false Metal*; the Former comprehends *Silver* or *Gold*, the Latter all *Baser Metals*" (10: 8). He reiterates his definition by citing a later law which "shews that by the Words *Half-Penny* and *Farthing* of Lawful Money in that Statute concerning the *passing of Pence*, is meant a small Coin in *Half-pence* and *Farthings of Silver*" (10: 10). If Swift's opponent accepts his definitions, he must logically accept Swift's conclusion that Wood's brass halfpence are not legal currency; the argument is thus lost before it has even begun. Here Swift, as the Drapier, adopts the guise of an unlearned man simply seeking to explain difficult legal language in terms more comprehensible to his audience, but underneath the apparently neutral definition lurks one of Swift's central arguments against Wood's patent.

Most often, however, the battle with and for words is more nakedly conducted. In *Some Remarks Upon A Letter to Seven Lords*, for example, Swift quibbles with the expression of the writer he is answering and replies, "As for *the Head that has done the greatest*

*Mischief to the Kingdom*, I cannot consent it should fall, untill he and I have settled the Meaning of the Word *Mischief*" (3: 196). Words are the central weapons in such battles, and there is no pretense of impartiality or disinterestedness. This battle over words and their definitions occurs throughout the political works especially; most often Swift defines a controversial word or phrase in a government document he defends or attacks. So, for example, in *The Conduct of the Allies*, Swift defines the phrase "the whole Strength of the Nation" from the Grand Alliance treaty to mean the strength of the King's revenues but not also everything he can mortgage or borrow (6: 18). Through this definition Swift justifies the Harley ministry's decision not to increase supplies for the war; in doing so, he explicitly refutes the Whig definition of the phrase and thereby refutes their war policy. The side that wins the contest of definitions, in this case Swift's side and Swift's definitions, wins the support of the populace.

Of course while he worked for Harley's Tory administration, Swift always claimed that he himself was a Whig—an "old Whig" rather than a follower of the speculators and stock-jobbers the party had become—in matters of governance such as in support for a constitutional monarchy. Swift argued repeatedly that he had not changed, but the two parties had. This conflict between Whig and Tory (or old Whig) definitions of the same words is continually re-enacted in Swift's works. One of the clearest examples is the battle over the definition of "Wealth of the Nation": in *Examiner 13* Swift bemoans the corruption that "the Wealth of the Nation, that used to be reckoned by the Value of Land, is now computed by the Rise and Fall of Stocks" (3: 13). Over and over Swift argues that the landowners are the only proper judges of what is right for the nation, and he constantly scorns or satirizes the "Stock-jobbers and moneyed-men." The same argument recurs in another definition in the sixth *Drapier's Letter*: "I take the proper Definition of *Law* to be *the Will of the Majority of those who have Property in Land*" (10: 134). In consonance with the Tory view, Swift insists that the landowners are the truest citizens and the rightful possessors of legal and political power. The issue in these definitions is not primarily lexical correctness (although one of the corruptions Swift invariably charges his opponents with is misuse of language); rather the fundamental principles of government are being argued through the medium of these definitions. The fact that the Whigs still hold or have just held much of the political and economic power of England is what enables them to control the language; now that the Tories are newly in power (this is Swift's first *Examiner*), the "thing" can only be corrected after the word is corrected. Swift's contribution to

the new Tory government is that while Harley's ministry corrects the previous Whig administration's policies, Swift corrects their words. This is the purpose of *The Examiner's* definitions.

Another variation of employing definition for argumentative purposes to which Swift frequently resorts is defining or rather misdefining the words of his opponents. In many works in which he directly or indirectly answers the language of others, he often "explains" their words by putting the least charitable interpretation possible upon them, or distorting them altogether, and then claiming that the resultant definition is theirs rather than his. Martin Price argues that this is a "constant" trick of Swift's: because the power of words depends on association, Swift changes those associations subtly and subverts his foes' terms.<sup>6</sup> Very often, however, the subversion is not at all subtle. In *Examiner* 40, for example, Swift says of the Whigs and one of their key terms, "A Revolution-Principle, as their Writings and Discourses have taught us to define it, is a Principle perpetually disposing Men to Revolutions" (3: 147); here Swift reverses the frequent Whig claim that they are the party that accomplished and supported the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the party that safeguards the Act of Settlement, guaranteeing the succession of the Hanoverians. He employs a (mis-) definition no Whig would agree to in order to charge the Whigs with sympathies for the Pretender, and at the same time he claims that this is the Whig definition rather than his own. Another way he accomplishes this shift is to impersonate his opponent and have that opponent restate or redefine his own words in a more "honest" and less attractive way. In *A Letter of Thanks from My Lord Wharton to Bishop Asaph*, "Wharton" first refers to "*Such a Peace, as would have answer'd all our Prayers*," then restates the same phrase to the more mercenary "When the *Dutch* could get nothing by the War, nor we Whigs lose anything by a Peace," and finally restates it in baser and even more mercenary terms: "When we had exhausted all the Nation's Treasure...and so far enrich'd ourselves, and beggar'd our Fellow-Subjects, as to bring them under a Necessity of submitting to what Conditions we should think fit to impose" (6: 154). Swift's impersonation of Wharton here is part of his campaign to justify the Tory-negotiated peace with France by accusing Whig leaders, especially Wharton and the Duke of Marlborough, of prolonging the war out of personal greed.

A final example of a misdefinition "corrected" by an argument masquerading as a redefinition involves one of the more controversial terms of the age—"passive obedience." In *The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man* Swift cites a misdefinition of passive obedience that began in the early seventeenth century: "The *Clergy* of the two Reigns

before the *Revolution*...under the Terms of *Passive Obedience*, and *Non-Resistance*, are said to have preached up the unlimited Power of the Prince" (2: 16). He follows this misdefinition with a careful redefinition espousing the Tory or old Whig view that, according to the original and correct sense of the word, obedience is due to the whole balanced government including the Commons and Lords, and not only the King. The results of this misdefinition are wide-ranging and profound: Swift calls this mistake "the Foundation of all the political Mistakes" in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, a book which has done enough damage to church and state (2: 16). More seriously, this misunderstanding of the term passive obedience has led to a slavish dependency on the King from the clergy and their congregations, and this dependency has in some ways contributed to the need for the Revolution of 1688. In *The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man* (1708) Swift's purpose is generally to explain and defend the position of a moderate churchman aligned with neither party, and thus this misdefinition-redefinition serves little further argumentative purpose. But by the time he writes *Examiner* 33 in March, 1710, Swift is much more fully committed politically, and his exposure of the misdefinition and his redefinition of "passive obedience" have a clearer partisan political purpose. Swift introduces his redefinition in order to refute the charges of "Arbitrary Power, Tyranny, and Popery" that the Whigs hurl at the Tories. He announces as the purpose of *Examiner* 33, "I will therefore give two Descriptions of *Passive Obedience*; the first, as it is falsely charged by the *Whigs*; the other, as it is really professed by the Tories" (3: 112). The opening of each definition provides a fair sense of Swift's slant: the "Whig" definition begins, "The Doctrine of *Passive Obedience* is to believe, that a King, even in a limited Monarchy, holding his Power only from God, is only answerable to him. That, such a King is above all Law; that the cruellest Tyrant must be submitted to in all Things; and if his Commands be ever so unlawful, you must neither fly nor resist, nor use any other Weapons than *Prayers* and *Tears*" (3: 112). Opposed to this is the "correct" Tory definition: "They think that in every Government, whether Monarchy or Republick, there is placed a supream, absolute, unlimited Power, to which *Passive Obedience* is due....That, among us, as every Body knows, this Power is lodged in the King or Queen, together with the Lords and Commons of the Kingdom" (3: 113). Clearly Swift intends to throw the Whig accusation right back upon them. This redefinition in effect denies to the Whigs the "Revolution Principles" each party strives so hard to claim. Usually the Whigs proclaim most proudly their part in the Revolution, but if Swift's redefinition is accepted the



Whigs can only be seen as having opposed the Revolution. They must also logically be the current supporters of the Pretender, since James is the monarch to whom they owe absolute "passive obedience." Again the ostensible reason for Swift's redefinition (and indeed the often-stated purpose of *The Examiner* itself) is to set the record straight, but this Whig misdefinition-Tory redefinition in fact serves the advancement of an argument rather than lexical accuracy, indeed, at the cost of lexical accuracy.

After his (mis-)definitions Swift frequently makes the ingenuous claim that his is the only possible interpretation; by their tone and, indeed, by their very presence such protests are generally a very clear signal that Swift is well aware he is twisting his opponents' words back on them. In the fourth *Drapier's Letter* Swift answers some letters published in London newspapers that he claims were directed, if not written, by Wood in order to attack the Drapier and the refusal of the Irish to accept Wood's halfpence. Swift plays with some of the phrases from these letters and offers just such a (mis-)definition and protest: "They are going to *Shake off their Dependence upon the Crown of England*; that is to say, *they are going to chuse another King*: For there can be no other Meaning in this Expression, however some may pretend to strain it" (10: 61). Swift's misinterpretation again serves a political purpose: Wood's expression refers to the controversy over the legal right of the English Parliament to make laws for Ireland, but Swift deliberately exaggerates and misdefines Wood's words in order to accuse Wood of "Slander" when actually it is Swift who slanders Wood. By protesting against other interpretations of these words, Swift indicates their very presence and, in fact, calls attention to them. Swift then employs this misdefinition as a preface to his own definition of "a depending Kingdom," which once again carries his central argument that the English Parliament alone cannot make laws for Ireland alone.

Swift does fight to keep words politically correct, but he is far more often forced to "destroy" them. This is perhaps because of the generally losing position the Tories held during the early eighteenth century: Swift enjoyed a few brief years during the Tories' political control and produced official Tory documents like *The Conduct of the Allies* which set the linguistic and political record straight, but even most of this short period was spent fending off Whig encroachments on Tory power. Most of his career, however, he wrote in opposition to Whig governments solidly in power. A second reason Swift spent more time attacking the language of his opponents is that his concern for the use of words is habitually far more often a concern for their misuse, whether politically motivated or not. In his various writings

about language, his many satires of the misuse of language (*A Tale of a Tub*, *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, *Tatler* 230), and his various rhetorical strategies designed to guard language, Swift offers far more criticisms than answers. Speaking in particular about the Irish tracts and the *Drapier's Letters*, Edward Said argues that this is Swift's great skill: "His element was language, as was the enemy's, but far more than anyone he was able to exploit the negative aspects of the medium: its airiness, its impermanence, its potential for solipsistic debasement."<sup>7</sup>

What Irvin Ehrenpreis says of Swift's sermons might well be extended to the rest of his prose: "His obsession with correctness of language led him to practice definition and redefinition as part of his rhetoric."<sup>8</sup> This obsession manifests itself throughout Swift's work, from the overt prescriptions like the *Proposal* to the wildest satires of language abuse in the *Tale*, and definition in all its forms and rhetorical techniques plays a central role in the pursuit of this correctness. There is, however, more to Swift's use of definition than its power to correct the word-thing relationship. What Swift says sarcastically of Tindall's work provides a fair final assessment of his own definitions: "The Strength of his Arguments is equal to the Clearness of his Definitions" (2: 81). In some definitions linguistic clarity is Swift's primary goal, but in his political arguments the "clarity" is perhaps evident only to Tories. In Swift's definitions it is more likely that the clarity of his arguments is equal to the strength of his definitions. Throughout his prose, this disenfranchisement through definition is a central strategy of Swift's politics of discourse and discourse of politics.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis et al. (Oxford, 1939-68), 8:96. Hereafter cited in text by volume and page.

<sup>2</sup>*The Advancement of Learning & New Atlantis*, ed. Arthur Johnston (Oxford, 1974), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup>*Leviathan, The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London, 1839), 3: 36.

<sup>4</sup>*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Locke, p. 413.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 25-6.

<sup>7</sup>Edward Said, "Swift's Tory Anarchy," *ECS*, 3 (1969), 48-66.

<sup>8</sup>Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, his Works, and the Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962-83), 3:80.